Effects of Thought Salience on Feelings of Uniqueness and Inclusiveness

A Senior Honors Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for graduation
with distinction in Psychology in the undergraduate colleges
of The Ohio State University

by

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May 2005

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Abstract

The present study examined two opposing needs involved in social behavior: standing out and fitting in. The American culture values individualism, yet at the same time, there exists in the United States the norm that women are more communal than men. Using an experimental paradigm developed from the theoretical perspectives of terror management and optimal distinctiveness, female college students thought about either their self or their gender group under a mortality salience or neutral condition. Participants were then given a gender identification measure, rated their preference for unique and inclusive abstract figures, and asked to choose between a unique and an inclusive pen. Following mortality salience, individuals primed with gender identified more with their gender group, preferred inclusive abstract figures, and were more likely to take the inclusive pen compared to the group with the self prime suggesting that maintaining the balance between standing out and fitting in can be tipped under mortality salience conditions, the direction of which depending on whether the individual is thinking of the group or the self.

Effects of Thought Salience on Feelings of Uniqueness and Inclusiveness

Reminders of death can occur on an everyday basis. Watching the news, passing by a cemetery, or being involved--directly or indirectly-- in war are all possible situations that would prime death thoughts in an individual. Thoughts of one's own mortality typically conflict with one's instinctual desire to live thus triggering issues about what life is really about, what it takes to be a "good" person, and basic goals for transcending death (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986). Being reminded of one's own death has been shown to affect a person's attitudes and behaviors ranging from subtle forms of aggression to blatant discrimination (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986; Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991). Dealing with mortality is best managed by feeling that one is an important member of something larger than life, and there are multiple pathways to accomplish this, for example, group memberships facilitate the need of fitting in and validating one's theory of reality (Castano, Yzerbyt, Paladino, & Sacchi, 2002). Optimal Distinctiveness Theory (ODT; Brewer, 1991) states that individuals seek a dynamic equilibrium between the competing needs of fitting in and standing out, and that an optimal balance is achieved through group identifications that provide equal opportunity for these needs. The goal of the current project was to examine these two opposing desires vis-à-vis group membership in our society. Specifically, this study addressed the question, will American women seek to stand out, or will they be more likely to try to fit in when dealing with mortality?

Terror Management Theory

Terror management theory (TMT) deals with the potential terror, or death-anxiety, caused by the opposing forces of the human's fundamental need for survival and the awareness of the inevitability of death (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986; Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991). Humans are capable of controlling this terror in specific ways: self-esteem buffers the anxiety caused by death awareness (i.e., mortality salience), and self-esteem is managed by subscribing to, and living up to the standards of a cultural worldview (CWV). Culture is a shared conception of reality that gives life meaning, order, and permanence. The CWV promises certain positive things like safety and death transcendence through literal or symbolic immortality as a result of adhering to the CWV (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986). Because death-anxiety is buffered by group identifications and affiliations, mortality salience often motivates assimilation to the in-group (i.e., fitting in) as a terror management strategy (Arndt, Greenberg, Schimel, Pyszczynski, Solomon, 2002). In general, various studies have shown that after mortality has been made salient, individuals increase their identification with and pride in important groups such as country, university, and gender (Castano, Yzerbyt, Paladino, & Sacchi, 2002; Dechesne, Greenberg, Arndt, & Schimmel, 2000; Arndt, Greenberg, Schimel, Pyszczynski, Solomon, 2002).

A TMT study conducted in Italy has shown that mortality salience effects ingroup entitativity, ingroup identification, and ingroup bias (Castano, Yzerbyt, Paladino, & Sacchi, 2002). In this study, Italian undergraduates were asked to answer questions about their own death or parallel questions about reading a book before

completing the dependent measures of ingroup entitativity, ingroup identification, and ingroup bias. Ingroup entitativity was measured by having participants rate their agreement on statements such as, "Italians have many characteristics in common," and "Italy has real existence as a group." The identification scale included items such as, "I identify with Italians," and "Being Italian has nothing to do with my identity." The ingroup bias measure had participants rate an ingroup (Italians) and an outgroup (Germans) on 10 traits, such as, competent, organized, passionate, and sociable. Participants in the mortality salience condition rated the ingroup as significantly more entitative, experienced greater identification with the ingroup, and evaluated the ingroup (Italians) more positively than the outgroup (Germans) compared to the non-mortality salience condition. This study is a basic example used to illustrate that strengthening identification with the ingroup (fitting in) is a successful terror management strategy due to the validation of the CWV by the power of group membership. This gives reason to further investigate social identity and its role in the needs of fitting in and standing out.

Optimal Distinctiveness Theory

Optimal distinctiveness theory (ODT; Brewer, 1991) was designed to help explain the complex concept of social identity. Using social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) as a foundation, this theory proposes that individuals seek to find a balance between the need to fit in and stand out, and the balance can be tipped, causing compensatory actions to regain a balance. When one is part of a larger collective, one will need to seek a balance by standing out in some way in order to reassert uniqueness

outside of the group. If an individual feels exceedingly unique, he or she will seek a balance by fitting in some way to reemphasize his/her position in a larger social group.

Pickett, Silver, and Brewer (2002) have noted that making social identity needs salient influences the importance of social groups. In this study, participants assigned to a *need for assimilation* (i.e., need-to-fit-in) group were asked to describe two situations where they felt deviant from other people around them. Alternatively, a *need for differentiation* (i.e., need-to-stand-out) group was asked to describe two instances when they felt their identities were indistinguishable from other people around them. Participants in a third (control) group were asked to describe two instances where they felt that there were some people around whose identities were very similar and yet some whose identities were very different. In the need for differentiation group, participants rated broad social categories, such as nationality, ethnicity, and religious affiliation as *less* important than the control group. In contrast, participants in the need for assimilation group rated these categories as *more* important than the control group.

Current Study

The current study combines the paradigms of TMT and ODT research to further investigate the needs of standing out and fitting in. Research from ODT has shown that the importance of certain groups *decreases* after manipulating the need to stand out in order to reassert uniqueness. Research from TMT has shown that the importance of certain groups *increases* after mortality is made salient by experimental manipulation because people desire to validate and strengthen their CWV.

Membership to a CWV can range from large groups of people to small groups. For example, Americans are viewed as individualistic, meaning they share a common belief in the importance of the individual and in the merits of personal independence (Kim & Markus, 1999). However, for American women specifically, there exists in the gender norm that women are more communal, which includes characteristics such as caring, nurturant, interpersonally sensitive, and concerned with the welfare of others (Kay & Jost, 2005; Eagly, 1987). Therefore, this study was designed to find out whether females would desire to fit in as stated by the gender CWV, or to stand out as stated in the American CWV after thinking about either their gender group or about the self as a function of mortality salience. It is possible that after making mortality salient, individuals who are first primed with a focus on membership to a group will then desire to stand out, in order to reestablish their individual uniqueness in an effort to live up to the individualistic, uniqueness-standard of the American CWV. However, it is also possible that following mortality salience, individuals who are first primed with a focus on membership to a group will then choose to fit in, in order to reestablish their position in the collective unit.

Method

Participants

One hundred nine female introductory psychology students at the Ohio State University Newark campus participated in exchange for research credit. Demographically, participants ranged in age from 18 to 38 with a mean age of 19.73; 86% identified themselves as Caucasian, 12% as African-American, and 2% as other.

Participants were run in groups of 4 and randomly assigned to conditions in a 2 (group prime vs. self prime) X 2 (mortality salience vs. exam control) between-subjects design.

Procedure

Introductory psychology students volunteered for the study by signing their names on a sheet posted near the psychology laboratory. The cover story, as previously used, was that the experimenters were interested in "Personality Traits and Attitudes," and explained that participants will be required to complete a variety of questionnaires (Simon et al., 1997). The materials for the study were placed in a three-ring binder with tabs dividing each set of measures. Before participants arrived, the notebooks were placed at four work stations. Upon arrival, students sat at the work areas separated by dividers. Participants were given a brief description of the study and were told to turn behind the correct tab and work until they got to the next tab and stop. Tab one, entitled "Domestic Information and Preferences," included the demographic questionnaire and either the group salience prime (gender) or the self prime (personal preferences). Behind tab two was the "Life Events" questionnaire the administered either the mortality salience prime or the exam control. Because death thoughts are most accessible after a delay (e.g., Greenberg et al., 1990), all participants completed a distraction task behind tab three, entitled "Visualization Task."

Participants then completed the dependent measures to assess the desire to fit in or stand out using three different variables: group identification, preferences, and behavior. Other measures included the Rosenberg (1965) Self-Esteem Scale, which was used mainly as a precautionary measure as discussed later. These measures were all

included behind tab 4 entitled "General Preferences and Attitudes." Participants were then fully debriefed and given research credit.

Manipulations

Group Salience. Participants were asked to answer questions about their current and future preferences of living situations in terms of coed and single-sex as used in previous research that made gender salient in female participants (Shih, Pittinsky, Ambady, 1999). The questions included the following examples: (a) "Do you prefer coed or single-sex living situations?" (b) List three reasons why you would prefer a coed living situation." and (c) "List three reasons why you would prefer a single-sex living situation." The questions for the self salience group will include: (a) "Do you use the university email service?" (b) "Would you consider subscribing to cable television?" and (c) "List one or two reasons why you would or would not subscribe to cable television."

Mortality salience. Mortality was made salient by using the two open-ended questions most commonly used in terror management research (e.g., Arndt et al., 2002; Simon et al., 1997; Greenberg et al., 1990). The questions were as follows: (a) "Please briefly describe the emotions that the thought of your own death arouses in you." and (b) "Jot down, as specifically as you can, what you think will happen to you physically as you die and once you are physically dead." Participants in the control group answered parallel questions about an upcoming exam, which is used as a control in TMT research because it is an unpleasant circumstance that has been shown to create

negative affect, which ensures that any differences found are not due to differences in affect (Simon et al., 1997; Greenberg et al., 1995).

Distraction Task. After administrating the independent variables and before participants engaged in the dependent measures, they had three minutes to complete a distraction task. The task chosen for this study was a maze created by an online maze generator. The maze used was selected based on the guiding principle that it be difficult enough to take an average of three minutes to solve in pretests.

Materials

Group Identification. Four questions were embedded in a larger scale to measure group identification (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992). Participants rated how much they agreed (1= strongly disagree, and 7=strongly agree) with statements such as, "I dislike being a woman," and "I act like a woman to a great extent." Higher scores meant stronger gender identification.

Preferences. Participants were asked to their preference of unique and inclusive abstract figures (0= strongly dislike, 8= strongly like) adopted from a study by Kim and Markus (1999) which assessed differences in preference between people from collectivist and individualistic cultures. Scores were reversed for the unique figures for data analysis, which resulted in higher scores meaning greater preference for inclusive figures.

Behavior. The behavioral measure employed another technique developed by Kim and Markus (1999). Each participant was presented five pens and asked to select one as a gift for their participation. The ink color of all pens was black and the barrel

color of pens was either orange or light green (these colors were chosen for this study based on pretest results from the Kim and Markus (1999) study which showed the preference for orange and light green pens did not differ). The pens were presented in a one-four color ratio. The minority pen (one out of four) was the unique pen whereas the majority pen (3 out of 4) was inclusive; the color of the unique pen was counterbalanced. If students selected the unique pen, this indicated the desire to stand out (assert uniqueness), and selection of the inclusive pen indicated the desire to fit in (assert inclusiveness).

Self-esteem. Because TMT research shows that self-esteem buffers death anxiety (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986), participants also completed Rosenberg's (1965) Self-Esteem Scale, which is a common measure of self-esteem. This was completed as a precautionary measure to ensure that self-esteem did not vary between groups and act as a confound.

Results

Separate 2(group prime vs. neutral prime) X 2(mortality salience vs. exam prime) ANOVAs were conducted on group identification, preference for abstract figures, the likelihood of taking the inclusive pen, and self-esteem. A consistent pattern resulted with significant interactions in the mortality conditions for all three dependent measures: group identification $F(1, 107) = 4.068$, $p = .046$, $R^2 = .08$; preference for inclusive figures $F(1, 107) = 3.737$, $p = .056$, $R^2 = .053$; and behavior based on the likelihood of taking the inclusive pen $F(1, 104) = 3.764$, $p = .05$, $R^2 = .07$. There were no differences between groups for self-esteem (all p's $> .2$).

Behavior. Independent Samples Tests revealed significant differences between the mortality groups on the behavioral pen measure. Individuals who thought about their gender were significantly more likely to take the inclusive pen (M = .63, SD = .49), and individuals who thought about the self were significantly more likely to take the unique pen (M = .27, SD = .45) (t (51) = 2.77, p = .01) (see Figure 1). There were no other significant differences for the behavioral pen measure.

Group Identification. Following the same pattern, and in accordance with previous TMT research, individuals thinking about gender and mortality identified more with their gender group (M = 6.53, SD = .85) than all other groups: individuals thinking about the self and mortality (M = 5.94, SD = .71) (t (52) = 2.73, p = .01), individuals thinking about their gender and their next exam (M = 5.99, SD = .84) (t(31) = 2.43, p = .02), and individuals thinking about the self and their next exam (M = 6.04, SD = .86) (t(50) = 2.05, p = .05) (see Figure 2).

Preferences. For the abstract figures, individuals thinking about the self and their next exam (M = 5.29, SD = 1.21) were significantly different from all other groups: individuals thinking about gender and mortality (M = 4.71, SD = 1.7) (t(50) = 2.05, p = .05), individuals thinking about the self and mortality (M = 4.49, SD = .99) (t (48) = 2.59, p = .01), and individuals thinking about their gender and their next exam (M = 4.54, SD = 1.25) (t(53) = 2.25, p = .03) (see Figure 3).

Discussion

This data reveals that after mortality salience, female college students desire to *fit in* when gender is made salient, and to *stand out* when the self is made salient. What

can be assessed from this study is that according to TMT, increased inclusiveness is a strategy that buffers death-anxiety when group is made salient, and increased uniqueness is a strategy that buffers death-anxiety when the self is made salient. The group that thought about gender and death coincides with previous TMT studies showing that group identification increases after mortality salience. Neither do these results counter the premise of ODT (Brewer, 1991) in that the balance of fitting in and standing out is one that at times requires compensatory maintenance according to the current context. This suggests that managing terror also depends on which aspect of the CWV the person is thinking about.

An interesting piece of information gathered from the results is that as seen on the right-hand side of figure 4, women did not follow the gender norm of being communal after thinking about the self and their own death. On the contrary, they acted as unique individuals, not part of a greater collective.

The interpretation of the behavioral pen measure may be a limitation to this study. An alternative explanation, for example, could be that a person may have taken the inclusive pen not because they wanted to fit in, but because they believed the unique pen (the pen represented only once) was the most popular choice, thus symbolizing the person's desire to stand out by not wanting to make the same choice as others. However, to avoid this particular interpretation, participants were purposely led to believe that the pen containers were randomly filled by the experimenter only moments prior to presenting them as gifts.

Future research may investigate how other sub-groups within the United States would respond to this type of thought salience. It could be hypothesized that men would react differently than women, since the gender norm for men includes characteristics for being agentic, such as assertive, controlling, forceful, and independent (Eagly, 1987).

In closing, this study is important in showing that terror management strategies are influenced by the thoughts that are salient to an individual at that particular time. Likewise, the balance of fitting in and standing out can be tipped under mortality salience conditions, the direction of which depending on whether the individual is thinking of the group or the self.

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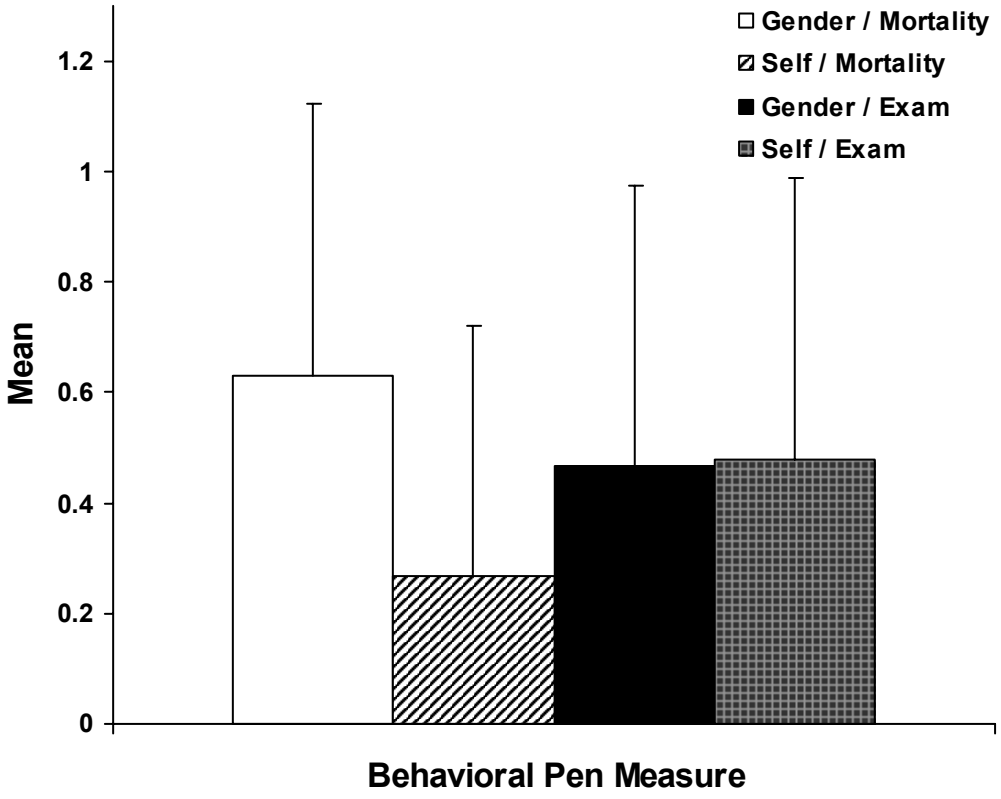
Figure Caption

Figure 1. Mean scores across conditions for the behavioral pen measure, higher scores reflect inclusiveness.

Figure 2. Mean scores across conditions for group identification, higher scores reflect greater identification.

Figure 3. Mean scores across conditions for abstract figures, higher scores reflect greater preference for inclusive abstract figures.


Gender / Mortality
Self / Mortality
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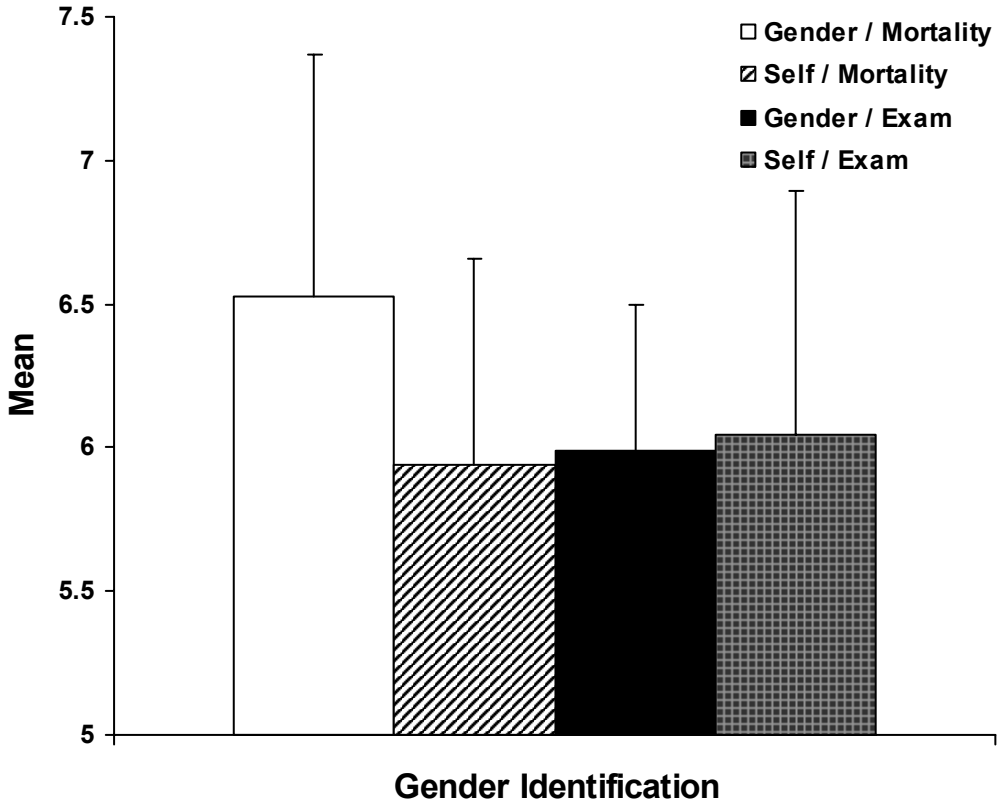
Mean
Behavioral Pen Measure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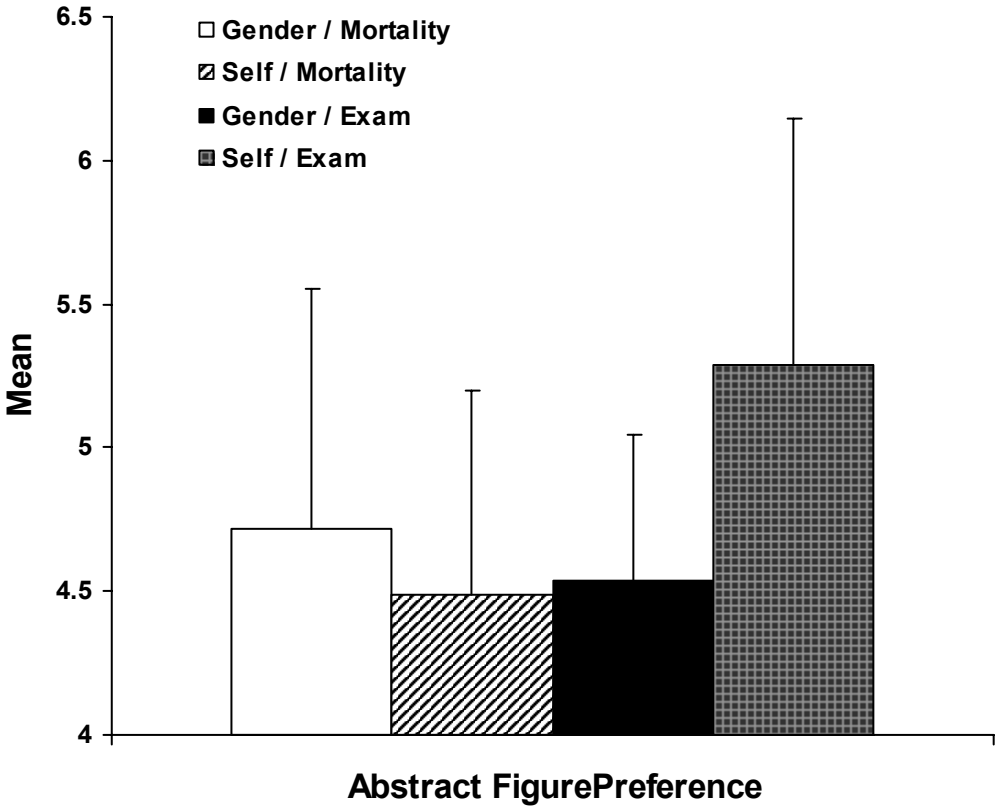
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